

The Saga of Joseph: Waiting for Blessing Genesis 49:1-28

What is it that goes into making you who you are?
Genetics or upbringing... God's sovereign hand... your free choices?

For the 12 sons of Israel, it was the word of their father, spoken individually to each of them.

It seems very strange to our ears. As a culture we place more weight on our own personal choices. Choose your own destiny. Be who you want to be.

Part of being made in the image of God is possessing a will. And God certainly holds us accountable for the choices we make, good or bad.

But there is no getting around that the Bible also teaches something called covenant headship.

A covenant is a relationship with rules. Marriage is an example of a covenant relationship. The couple does not establish the rules of the relationship for themselves. God has established the rules of marriage from the beginning.

Every human being lives in a covenant relationship with God. God has established the rules of this relationship from the beginning. We do not have the freedom to re-write those rules. For starters, God is the Lord of the Covenant. That means that He is in charge. Not us.

Much more can be said about the concept of covenant. We will leave that for another time.

What about headship?

Headship is the idea of representation.

One person stands over a larger group as its representative.

That person's choices affect the future of the whole group.

How a person becomes a covenant head is ultimately determined by God, as we will see. But, for the sake of illustration, let's be more democratic.

What if we needed to choose one covenant head for all the people in this room? Here is the deal, if you can choose one representative for yourselves who can run around the church in less than 30 seconds, I will give each one of you \$100. If this person takes more than 30 seconds, each one of you must give me \$100. You get 5 minutes to choose your representative.

... you get the point. Your getting \$100 depends on the success of your representative, your covenant head.

You may or may not like this arrangement.
But like it or not, it is how God has established the human race.

Every person to have ever lived has Adam as their covenant head. It just so happens that Adam failed his test. His failure is also our failure. Adam was not chosen democratically. He was chosen by God. Trust me, you could not have chosen better.

Adam's failure is also our failure.
Because he represented us as our covenant head.

God, in his mercy, just after Adam plunged the world into sin, promised to redeem a people for himself.

And he promised to do this by a Redeemer who would be a descendant of Adam and Eve.

This Redeemer would be a new covenant head. And where Adam failed, this man would succeed.

But God did not say exactly who this new covenant head would be. He simply wanted His people to wait for him to come.

The promise of blessing would be joined to this new covenant head. Of course, we know this covenant head to be Jesus Christ.

We receive the fulness of blessing because our covenant head was perfect in every way. We receive victory because Jesus won victory for us.

In order to show the greatness of Jesus as our covenant head, the Old Testament presents other lesser covenant heads who come up short.

With each new failure, God drove His people to yearn for another. That is what we see happening in our passage today.

Read Genesis 49:1-2.

Then
Jacob called his sons
and
said,
"Gather yourselves together,
that I may tell you
what shall happen to you
in days to come.
2 "Assemble
and
listen,
O sons of Jacob,
listen to Israel
your father.

Jacob's calling his family together is sort of like the reading of a last will and testament.

The only difference is that Jacob does not yet possess what he is giving to his sons. The Blessing that Jacob is bestowing on his children has everything to do with the Land of Canaan.

And yet, Jacob does not possess the Land of Canaan. It is not his to give... except by way of promise.

Jacob assembles his whole family together. He wants every son to hear all his words. Even though each son will have an individual blessing, they all have an interest in the whole blessing.

Jacob's words are recorded in a poem. Jacob may not have spoken them in the form of a poem. But they were handed down from generation to generation in this form. Poetry is by its very nature, challenging to pin down.

It is also important to see that every son functions as a covenant head to his whole tribe. The relative blessing of each tribe will connect with the life of obedience or disobedience of each son.

Jacob begins with Reuben, his firstborn.

Read Genesis 49:3-4.

3 **"Reuben,**
 you are my firstborn,
 my might,
 and
 the firstfruits of my strength,
 preeminent in dignity
 and
 preeminent in power.
4 Unstable as water,
 you shall not have preeminence,
 because you went up
 to your father's bed;
 then you defiled it-
 he went up to my couch!

How would you feel if you were Reuben?

"Uh, Dad, that does not seem like much of a blessing."

Reuben had been given the privileged position in the family.

It did not feel like much at the time, because Jacob gave most of his affection to Joseph.

And so, Reuben decided to take matters into his own hands.
He sleeps with Rachel's maidservant.
More than an act of lust, this was a power play. Reuben is seeking to solidify his position in the family.
In doing so, Reuben loses his position of privilege.
Reuben loses his place of preeminence, not only for himself, but also for his descendants.

Reuben functions as a covenant head of his tribe.
Because Reuben is imperfect in his leadership, he fails to give a wonderful blessing to his people.

What is it that is taken away from Reuben?
He loses power and honor.
We see Jacob's words coming true in that no prophet, judge, priest, or king ever comes from his tribe.
The tribe of Reuben received land in the area east of the Jordan and quickly faded from significance. As time went on they were incorporated into the Tribe of Gad.

If you were of the tribe of Reuben, what would you be thinking?
"What can I do to fix this?"
"I need a better covenant head."

"Is my destiny really determined by my ancestor who lived generations before me?"

That seems to be the point...

Read Genesis 49:5-7.

5 **"Simeon**
 and
 Levi
 are brothers;
 weapons of violence are their swords.
6 Let my soul come not into their council;

7

O my glory, be not joined to their company.
For in their anger they killed men,
and
in their willfulness they hamstrung oxen.
Cursed be their anger,
for it is fierce,
and
their wrath,
for it is cruel!
I will divide them in Jacob
and
scatter them in Israel.

Jacob handles Simeon and Levi together because they acted together in the fiasco with the Shechemites. (Gen. 34:25-27)

They believed they were acting in righteous anger because their sister had been raped. But instead, they wiped out a whole town for one man's sin.

Reuben wrongly sought power.
Simeon and Levi unjustly sought revenge.

At the time we were not totally sure how Jacob felt about their actions. We have no doubt about his feelings now.

And like Reuben, the actions of Simeon and Levi greatly affect their posterity. They function as covenant heads of their tribes. And, to some degree, they bring a curse upon their people.

What does Jacob prophesy regarding their future?

I will divide them in Jacob
and
scatter them in Israel

Rather than having their own plot of land on which to enjoy their inheritance, they will be scattered throughout the land.

How does this play itself out?

The boundaries of the Tribe of Simeon fall within the boundaries of the Tribe of Judah.

Simeon's descendants are eventually absorbed into the territory of Judah.

Levi's descendants are associated with the priesthood and are given care of the Temple. They are given no land inheritance, except that they are apportioned 48 towns and pasturelands among the twelve tribes. Becoming caretakers of the Temple is certainly a picture of God's mercy to Levi. But for the present, Levi's descendants are scattered.

What would a member of these tribes be thinking?

"My inheritance has been all mucked up because my forefather sinned."

What hope could you give them?

"You need a better covenant head."

Jacob gives them this hope when he gets to the blessing on Judah.

Read Genesis 49:8-12.

8 **"Judah,**
 your brothers shall praise you;
 your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies;
 your father's sons shall bow down before you.
9 Judah is a lion's cub;
 from the prey,
 my son,
 you have gone up.
 He stooped down;
 he crouched
 as a lion
 and
 as a lioness;
 who dares rouse him?
10 The scepter shall not depart from Judah,

nor
the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him;
and
to him shall be the obedience of the peoples.
11 Binding his foal to the vine
and
his donkey's colt to the choice vine,
he has washed
his garments in wine
and
his vesture in the blood of grapes.
12 His eyes are darker than wine,
and
his teeth whiter than milk.

The blessing that Jacob gives to Judah is not a blessing for Judah alone.
It is a blessing that will bless all the tribes.
And it will be a blessing that will even bless the peoples (the nations).

It is significant that Jacob does not make mention of Judah's past, good or bad.
It is certainly true that Judah is emerging as the leader of the family. But his past
has been sketchy, at best. Judah's heritage is one of repentance and humility in
the face of his sin.

Judah is not receiving this blessing because he has lived a perfect life.
How does Jacob describe Judah's destiny?
He makes three statements.

1. Your brothers will praise you
2. Your hand will be on the neck of your enemies.
3. Your father's sons will bow down to you.

The first statement makes clear that the blessing on Judah will be good for all the
Tribes and they will give their praise to Judah.
The second statement makes clear that Judah will conquer her enemies.

The third statement goes even further and sees a future where the tribes will give their obedience to Judah.

These are powerful statements.

Jacob follows them up by describing Judah as a lion's cub, a lion, and a lioness.

All three speak of majesty and strength.

Ultimately, the kingship of Israel would come from Judah. And the symbol of the king's authority, the scepter, would not depart from Judah until tribute comes to him.

... until everyone gives him the submission he deserves.

This coming king would have the obedience of all Israel.

But He would also have the obedience of the nations.

The abundance of His kingdom would exceed all expectations. Under His rule, the blessing in all its fullness would be realized.

Verses 11-12 give us a poetic description of this abundance.

"He will tether his donkey to a vine; his colt to the choicest branch"

Vines are valuable. You wouldn't normally tether your donkey to one because he would eat it.

But there are so many fruitful vines that it no longer matters.

"He will wash his garments in wine, his robes in the blood of wine"

It is easy here to have your mind leap to the cross and being washed by the blood of Christ.

It is fine to do this, but before you do, take a moment to see this image also in terms of abundance.

You don't use something as valuable as wine to wash your garments.

Think of athletes after they win the championship. Very often they will take champagne and shake the bottles and spray it everywhere.

They are so happy and this occasion so rare, that it justifies wasting something as valuable as champagne.

This is the picture here.

This ruler will be awesome in every way.

“His eyes will be darker than wine (sparkling) and his teeth whiter than milk.”

His perfection is described in terms of physical perfection.

Of course, this passage is Messianic.

The rise of David and his line is predicted here. For a time David looked promising as the Promised Redeemer. But we are all familiar with David’s failures. No other king who came after David was up to par either... until Jesus Christ.

And it is in this coming Messiah that every Israelite should place their trust.

The Reubenites and the Simeonites and the Levites should all look to this Ruler to be their true covenant head.

You and I do not look back to a blessing pronounced upon any one of Jacob’s sons. We have Jesus as our perfect covenant head. And He has earned for us every spiritual blessing.

Ephesians 1:3 ³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

Ephesians 1:11-14 ¹¹ In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, ¹² so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. ¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

What we have in Christ is greater than any OT pronouncement of blessing, even though those blessings pointed us to the fulness of blessing in Christ.

Hebrews 8:6 ⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.

It would be easy to stop right now.
But we will continue.

Read Genesis 49:13.

13 **"Zebulun**
 shall dwell at the shore of the sea;
 he shall become a haven for ships,
 and
 his border shall be at Sidon.

Zebulun will live by the seashore and become a haven for ships.
Her border will be near Sidon.

If you look at a map you will see that the Tribe of Zebulun was landlocked.

There are plenty of explanations for this.
All I can say is that it is a problem, no matter how you slice it.

Zebulun's destiny has never clearly been fulfilled.

Read Genesis 49:14-15.

14 **"Issachar**
 is a strong donkey,
 crouching between the sheepfolds.
15 He saw
 that a resting place was good,
 and
 that the land was pleasant,
 so he bowed his shoulder to bear,
 and
 became a servant at forced labor.

What is implied by calling Issachar "a strong donkey crouching between the sheepfolds"?

Again, the interpretation is very hazy.

Some see the picture as her being stubborn.
Others see her as being hardworking.
Others think she must be strong, but lazy.

In the end, she lives in a beautiful place, but is not able to enjoy it. She becomes a servant of forced labor. Not the sort of blessing that I would want.

If I were of this tribe, I would be asking, can we go back to what you were saying about Judah?

Read Genesis 49:16-17.

16 **"Dan**
 shall judge his people
 as one of the tribes of Israel.
17 Dan
 shall be
 a serpent in the way,
 a viper by the path,
 that bites the horse's heels
 so that his rider falls backward.

Dan's prophecy is also confusing.
There are various attempts made to see how this is fulfilled.
Some think it may refer to Samson. I think it is a bit of a stretch.
There is no place where Dan's tribe is designated to be judges – like the Levites were set apart.

I think it is better to see the blessing of Dan as another disappointment.
Judges are to provide justice.
Instead, shall be like a poisonous snake.

Other than Judah, all of Jacob's blessings have proved to be more like "anti-blessings".

I think this is the reason for verse 18.

Read Genesis 49:18.

18 **I wait for your salvation, O LORD.**

This is an exclamation of Jacob.
It is not a part of the blessing of any tribe.

It is Jacob's determination to wait for the full and final blessing.

This is the very first time that yeshua is used in Scripture.

ה[׳Wvy> (y@shû±â) **salvation.**

But it will become common place from now on. God's people will use it in various context to express their hope that God would bring about the promised blessing.

ESV **Psalm 3:8** Salvation belongs to the LORD; your blessing be on your people! Selah

Even David, the king of Judah, would rather hope in this salvation than in himself.

Psalm 21:1 TO THE CHOIRMASTER. A PSALM OF DAVID. O LORD, in your strength the king rejoices, and in your salvation how greatly he exults!

Every OT believer would hope in this salvation.

ESV **Psalm 35:9** Then my soul will rejoice in the LORD, exulting in his salvation.

And this salvation is more than simply being saved from something or even to something. It includes nothing less than the possession of God Himself.

ESV **Psalm 42:5** Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you in turmoil within me? Hope in God; for I shall again praise him, my salvation

We have seen the promised Messiah. Jesus has come. Jesus is the Salvation of the Lord.

And yet, we continue to wait. The blessing is ours in Christ. But we are called to wait.

We have been given the Spirit as a downpayment. But we are still waiting for our promised inheritance.

Only our inheritance will not be messed up by some failure in our covenant head. Not possible. Our covenant head is perfect. And so is the blessing he has earned for us.

And He keeps that inheritance in heaven, where it cannot fade or be spoiled.

And so, we too are waiting for blessing.

Read Genesis 49:19.

19 "Raiders shall raid
 Gad,
 but
 he shall raid at their heels.

Gad's future seems to be one of being attacked and striking back at raiders. Gad is positioned E of the Jordan and will become a region that it continually experiencing attacks.

The Amonites, the Moabites, the Arameans, and the Assyrians will all come through this region.

Gad is known for producing warriors.

If fighting is your sort of thing, you might be drawn to Gad. But the truth is that this is NOT the hoped for blessing! Gad is another disappointment.

Read Genesis 49:20.

20 "**Asher's**
 food shall be rich,
 and
 he shall yield royal delicacies.

Asher means "happy" so we might call it "The Happy Tribe!"

It is true that Asher will dwell upon the northern coastline of the Mediterranean.
It is rich land. And it will be a region for trade as well.
They will provide delicacies for the king.

If we interpret this in light of the prophecy of Judah, once again, the blessings of this tribe are connected to the coming king.

Asher does not yield great blessing for herself, but for the King of all Israel.

Read Genesis 49:21.

21 **"Naphtali**
 is a doe let loose
 that bears beautiful fawns.

The blessing on Naphtali sounds great, but it is difficult to understand how it is fulfilled.

Read Genesis 49:22-26.

22 **"Joseph**
 is a fruitful bough,
 a fruitful bough by a spring;
 his branches run over the wall.
23 The archers bitterly attacked him,
 shot at him,
 and
 harassed him severely,
24 yet
 his bow remained unmoved;
 his arms were made agile
 by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
 (from there is the Shepherd,
 the Stone of Israel),
25 by the God of your father
 who will help you,
 by the Almighty
 who will bless you

26

with blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that crouches beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
The blessings of your father are mighty
beyond the blessings of my parents,
up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.
May they be
on the head of Joseph,
and
on the brow of him
who was set apart from his brothers.

When we get to the blessing of Joseph, we finally see another Tribe that seems to have a real blessing.

Joseph is a fruitful vine that extends beyond the borders of the wall.

Joseph will experience invasion but will ultimately conquer.

But what strikes one is the way that Joseph will conquer:

As with the blessing upon Judah, it will be only by the power of God alone that Joseph will be blessed.

Three times we see the preposition “by” to point us to Yahweh alone.

1. by the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob
(from there is the Shepherd, the Stone of Israel),
2. by the God of your father who will help you,
3. by the Almighty who will bless you

And as with Jacob’s prayer in verse 18, we are taken to a blessing that surpasses every other blessing.

The Almighty will bless you with:

blessings of heaven above,
blessings of the deep that crouches beneath,
blessings of the breasts and of the womb.
26 The blessings of your father are mighty
beyond the blessings of my parents,
up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.

It is difficult to see this any other way than as the eternal blessings of the New Heavens and New Earth.

Jacob says that it is beyond the blessings of my parents, up to the bounties of the everlasting hills.

Joseph is blessed, not because of Joseph, but because of the Shepherd, the Mighty One of Jacob, the Rock of Israel. = The Messiah.

The blessing is procured through the coming king of Judah.
And the greatness of the blessing is pronounced upon Joseph.

Read Genesis 49:27.

27 **"Benjamin**
 is a ravenous wolf,
 in the morning devouring the prey
 and
 at evening dividing the spoil."

Benjamin is likened to a ravenous wolf, fighting all day and conquering, but not ever having enough.

If you look at Benjamin's land allotment, it is here that Jerusalem is situated. And because of such she will be right in the middle of every war over Jerusalem. And King Saul would come from the tribe of Benjamin.

If I were a Benjamite, I would seek my inheritance in the blessings upon Judah.

Genesis 49:28.

28 All these are the twelve tribes of Israel.
 This is what their father said to them
 as he blessed them,
 blessing each with the blessing
 suitable to him.

So, here is the question to ask: Do you want a blessing suitable to your parents?
Do you want a blessing suitable to your own obedience or disobedience?

Or do you want a blessing that is suitable to the righteousness of Jesus Christ?

This is why our faith is in Jesus Christ alone for our salvation.

Jesus alone is the perfect covenant head.

He alone has won for you the glories of heaven above.

What is it then that determines your eternal destiny?

It is one of two covenant heads: Adam or Jesus!

Are you waiting upon the salvation of Yahweh?

Or are you resting in some other form of blessing?

I hope that my actions as a parent bring blessing to my children. But those blessings are very much mixed with my failures. I am thankful that my children's eternal blessing is not determined by me. I am not their eternal covenant head.

There is only one covenant head in glory – It is Jesus Christ alone – the Head of all His people.

May we all cry out with Jacob:

ESV **Genesis 49:18** I wait for your salvation, O LORD.

